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THE PROBLEM OF HOME WORK PAPERS.

It is the practice of many teachers of high-school mathematics, and particularly of beginning algebra, to require their students to hand in daily home work papers. No useful purpose is served by this unless the papers are carefully corrected and returned to the pupils at the next recitation. The careful daily correction of such a large number of papers, however, requires time and such a large amount of energy that the teacher who attempts it has no time or energy left for more important things. The teacher of high-school mathematics today must devote considerable time to professional improvement, to the reading of magazines such as THE MATHEMATICS TEACHER and of educational journals of a more general character, and to the study of the larger problems of his profession. Further, he must have time to carefully plan his daily work and to study and solve his individual problems. Work of this kind demands time and energy and is much more important than the grind and drudgery of correcting home work papers.

Home work papers are usually intended to serve two purposes: (*a*) to enable the teacher to keep constantly in touch with the work done by individual pupils and thus to detect errors and misunderstandings almost as soon as they occur, and (*b*) to give the teacher evidence that the practice work assigned to be done by the pupils outside of the class hour has been performed.

It is very important, particularly when starting a new type of work, to keep in close touch with the work being done by individual pupils so as to detect and correct mistakes at once. Home work papers are one means of doing this; they are not the only means, however, nor are they the best. They show only the finished product and do not always make clear the mental processes by which that finished product was obtained. In other words they show the students' mistakes but too often do not show the cause of those mistakes. Further, the papers do not always represent the work of the student, who often receives help at home (and home help too often means that the parents or an older brother or sister have really done the work), or perhaps copies the work directly from some other student. Home work papers, by themselves, are a very wasteful and unsatisfactory means of locating the students' difficulties. The only means of really doing this effectively is class room work, at their seats or at the blackboard, under the direct supervision of the teacher. The class period should be a work period and not a recitation. A wide-awake, skilful teacher can discover more about an individual student's difficulties and ability in one supervised work period than by correcting home work papers every day for a week. The ideal way to teach mathematics is to have a longer class period and to have all of the work done in class under the supervision of the teacher. Even where this is not possible, however, most of the class period should be devoted to supervised work on new material.

If the class periods are so short that all of the work can not be done in class, and assignments for outside preparation must be made, it is necessary to check up on the work in some way to be sure that all of the students are preparing the assignments. Having the students hand in home work papers is, again, one means of doing this. It is not a very effective means, however, as the student who has not prepared the assignment almost invariably copies the work from some other member of the class. After all, the best evidence that the teacher can have that the student has done the work assigned for home preparation is the ability of that student to do more work of the same kind in class. In fact, it is much more important to know what a student can do, unassisted in class, than to know what he has done outside of class, perhaps with more or less assistance.

In addition to the two purposes already mentioned, home-work papers are sometimes used in another way. Some teachers grade the daily papers and use the marks given in determining the final standing of the students. This is bad practice in several ways. In the first place it encourages cheating. If the students know that their daily home work papers are used in determining their final standing the temptation to hand in a good paper, even if they must copy it from some other student, is very strong. In the second place it puts the slow pupil at an unfair disadvantage. The student who learns slowly, who does not grasp a point immediately but who by patient work finally masters the subject, is penalized unfairly if the mistakes he makes in the early stages of each new type of work are counted against him. Students should learn that it is no disgrace to make mistakes, that the only disgrace is to keep on making the same mistake time after time. They should see that it is often by making mistakes and correcting them that they grow and laern. For this reason the best basis for awarding a mark to a student is the teacher's estimate of the work finally done by that student, based on close observation of the work done by the student in class and upon the results of short tests given at frequent intervals and covering small units of the work.

If the point of view taken in the preceding discussion is correct, the skilful teacher can, without the drudgery of correcting daily home work papers, accomplish more by some such method as the following than could possibly be accomplished by such papers.

I. A few minutes should be taken at the beginning of the class period to check up on the outside work assigned. This can usually be done rapidly by reading and comparing results. As soon as the individual students find out which problems they have failed to solve correctly, they should be sent to the board to try these problems again under the watchful eye of the teacher so that he can locate and help them overcome their difficulties. Students who have no difficulty with any of the assigned work, and the others as soon as their difficulties are mastered, should be given new material to work with. It is true that pupils may not always report difficulties, but if they do not they will get into similar trouble with the new work attempted in class, which will serve the teacher's purpose equally as well.

II. If the teacher feels the need he can have papers handed in occasionally, particularly when taking up a new type of work. If the pupils know that their home work papers may be called for at any time without warning it will be just as effective in forcing them to prepare the daily assignments as if the papers are handed in each day. Whenever the papers are handed in they should be corrected and returned at the next class period, at which time the pupils should be required to work over, under the supervision of the teacher, all problems on which they failed.

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